

2012 Census of Governments: Finance—Survey of Public Pensions: State- and Locally-Administered Defined Benefit Data

Systems Methodology

The U.S. Census Bureau sponsors and conducts the Survey of Public Pensions as authorized by Title 13, United States Code, Sections 161 and 182.

The survey measures revenues, expenditures, financial assets, and membership information for public-employee pension systems classified as defined benefit plans. Data are shown for individual pension systems as well as at the national, state, and local government level. The survey yields a series of tables and files that provide users with comprehensive statistical information about the financial activity and membership of state and local government employee pension systems.

Population of Interest

The population of interest for this survey includes public employee pension systems administered by state and local governments throughout the nation. Pension systems are only included if they meet the following two criteria: (1) they are sponsored by a recognized unit of government as defined by the Census Bureau and (2) their membership is comprised of public employees compensated with public funds. These pension systems consist of defined benefit plans – not defined contribution or post-employment healthcare plans. In years ending in ‘2’ and ‘7’ the entire universe is canvassed as part of the Census of Governments. In intervening years, a sample of the population of interest is surveyed.

Content of the Survey

A pension system is a pension plan in which investments, contributions, and benefits are administered as a separate entity independent of the parent government general fund. Assets are accumulated and benefits paid under a particular set of actuarial assumptions, including employee age, compensation, and service credits. They include single employer systems, in which one government is the sole sponsor of the pension plan, as well as multiple employer systems, where two or more governments maintain membership on behalf of their employees.

For both the Census of Governments and the annual survey, the detail of the data is equivalent, encompassing the entire range of financial activity for government employee pension systems – benefits paid, government contributions, employee contributions, and total holdings and investments. Total holdings and investments data include securities and other assets, such as cash and short-term investments, corporate bonds and stocks, and mortgages held directly.

The 2012 survey year encompasses fiscal years that end between July 1, 2011 and June 30, 2012. Most state- and locally-administered pension systems have fiscal years that end on June 30th and for those systems, the 2012 survey year covers the period from July 1, 2011 to June 30, 2012. For those state- and locally-administered pension systems with fiscal years that end **after** June 30th, the survey year includes data from their 2011 fiscal year.

There are exceptions to the fiscal year definition rule for the state pension systems in Alabama, Michigan, and Texas. For systems in these states, the fiscal year moves beyond the June 30th cutoff, so these data for survey year 2012 covers the fiscal year from September 1, 2011 to August 31, 2012 (TX), and from October 1, 2011 to September 30, 2012 (AL, MI). This exception is applied in order to better align the pensions data with data from the Survey of Government Finances.

The forms listed below are used to collect these data. The variables collected on these forms are explained in detail in the [2006 Government Finance and Employment Classification Manual](#).

Form Number	Survey Name
F-11 FY2012	Locally-Administered Defined Benefit Plans
F-12 FY2012	State-Administered Defined Benefit Plans

Data Collection

Data collected for the 2012 Census of Governments: Finance—Survey of Public Pensions: State- and Locally-Administered Defined Benefit Data are a matter of public record and are not confidential, as authorized by Title 13, United States Code, Section 9. Data for this survey were collected using the F-11 and F-12 forms listed in the Content of the Survey section above.

Forms were mailed to the 227 state government employee pensions systems and 3,771 local government employee pension systems. Staff contacted nonrespondents through a follow-up mailing and by way of follow-up telephone calls. All respondents had the option of returning their survey form or reporting their data on the Census Bureau's Internet data collection instrument. Data were submitted electronically for 51.4 percent of the state and local pensions respondents in 2012. When a system returned its Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR) instead of completing the form, Census Bureau staff compiled the data using the report. Staff also used CAFRs available on the Internet to compile data for nonrespondents.

The data collection schedule used for the 2012 Census of Governments: Finance—Survey of Public Pensions: State- and Locally-Administered Defined Benefit Data was as follows:

Initial mail-out	December 2012
Follow-up mail-out	March 2013

Data Processing

Editing

Editing is a process that ensures survey data are accurate, complete, and consistent. Efforts are made at all phases of collection, processing, and tabulation to minimize errors. Although some edits are built into the Internet data collection instrument and the data entry programs, the majority of the edits are performed post collection. Edits consist primarily of two types: consistency edits and historical ratio edits of the current year's reported value to a prior year's value.

The consistency edits check the logical relationships of data items reported on the form. For example, if a value exists for the number of retirees receiving benefits because of age or length of service then there must be a value reported for the amount of benefits paid.

The historical ratio edits compare by item code the data reported for the current year with data reported for the prior year or prior census for those not in the sample in the prior year. If data fall out of acceptable tolerance levels, the item is flagged for review.

For both types of edits, the edit results are reviewed by analysts and adjusted when needed. When analysts are unable to resolve or accept an edit failure, contact is made with the respondent to verify or correct the reported data.

Imputation

Not all respondents answer every item on the questionnaire. Effective with the 2012 Census of Governments: Finance—Survey of Public Pensions: State- and Locally-Administered Defined Benefit Data, the Survey improved upon item imputation method to fill in missing data based on grouping similar pension systems together. Both partial and full nonrespondents were imputed using either a mean growth rate, median growth rate, or direct substitution. These methods are applied to certain variables based on research conducted in 2013. A bridge study, which reviews the imputation method in detail, is forthcoming.

Nonsampling Error

The data from this survey are not from a sample and are not subject to sampling error, but they are subject to nonsampling error. Although every effort (as described in the Data Processing section) is made in all phases of collection, processing, and tabulation to minimize errors, these data are subject to nonsampling errors such as the inability to obtain data for every variable from all units in the survey, inaccuracies in classification, nonresponse errors, misinterpretation of questions, mistakes in keying and coding, and coverage errors.

Overall Response Rate

The overall response rate for the 2012 Census of Governments: Finance—Survey of Public Pensions: State- and Locally-Administered Defined Benefit Data was 74.0 percent. The response rate was calculated as the number of responses received divided by the number of parent governments mailed minus the number of governments that were determined to be out of scope.

Total Quantity Response Rate

The Total Quantity Response Rate for Total Holdings and Investments (Z81) of the 2012 Census of Governments: Finance—Survey of Public Pensions: State- and Locally-Administered Defined Benefit Data was 98.6 percent. The Total Quantity Response Rate was calculated as the value of “total holdings and investments” reported divided by the estimated total value of “total holdings and investments” of those units mailed minus those systems that were determined to be out of scope.